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Steven R. McKenna

Spontaneity and the Strategy of Transcendence in Burns's Kilmarnock Verse-Epistles



As a group, Robert Burns's verse-epistles have been consistently ignored by commentators, or at best have received only passing attention by those who expend their energies in analyzing his better known (and in many cases better) poems and songs. Two notable exceptions to this rule are the essays by John C. Weston¹ and G. Scott Wilson.² Weston views the epistles of Ramsay and Hamilton, Fergusson, and Burns in terms of a distinct sub-genre—the Scots verse-epistle—whose conventions Burns inherited and utilized for the purposes of creating a self-portrait. Wilson, more narrowly, views Burns's epistles strictly in terms of the financial and psychological motives behind the poet's image-making. In addition to these studies, I offer a thematic and structural analysis of Burns's first published epistles in the hope that it will shed additional light on his artistic purposes, achievements and shortcomings in this special and problematic poetic genre.

The epistle-as-poem creates certain structural and stylistic problems. Because Burns's early epistles were written as private communications

¹John C. Weston, "Burns's Use of the Scots Verse-Epistle Form," *Philological Quarterly*, 49 (April 1970), 188-210.

²G. Scott Wilson, "Robert Burns: The Image and the Verse-epistles," in *The Art of Robert Burns*, eds. R.D.S. Jack and Andrew Noble (London, 1982), pp. 127-50.

before becoming public poetic matter, transitions from the particular to the universal within the epistles had to occur if they were to be of more than arcane historical or scholarly interest to the wider universal audience that the poet undoubtedly envisioned. Indeed, for an epistle to be a great poem in its own right it must speak to a wider audience than the person or persons to whom it was nominally written. The problem inherent in this poetic genre (though certainly not limited to epistles alone) is that if the poet strives to create universally applicable themes in the epistle, then the epistle runs the risk of evolving into a poem with a salutation and a conclusion awkwardly appended. At worst, the universal sentiments may be clumsily inserted so that the movement from the particular to the universal and vice versa will appear abrupt and unnatural. The perfect resolution of these tensions would be to have the particular epistolary message itself be a universal statement—and this is no mean feat. With varying degrees of success, Burns's Kilmarnock verse-epistles illustrate the poet's struggles with and attempts to overcome just such problems of integration and balance. Furthermore, in the order they are arranged, the epistles display Burns's growing self-confidence as a poet not only in relationship to his art, but to his place within the social order as well. The epistle to James Smith, though not Burns's first attempt at the epistle form, is the first epistle to appear in the Kilmarnock edition. This epistle opens with a three-stanza epistolary introduction wherein Burns intimately and with good humor greets and flatters Smith. Burns then easily launches forth into seven stanzas of self-referential poetic theorizing. The transition from Burns's particular communication with Smith in the introduction to the more universal poetic concerns is facilitated by what I call Burns's "spontaneity formula":

Just now I've taen the fit o' rhyme,
My barmie noddle's working prime,
My fancy yerket up sublime
Wi' hasty summon:
Hae ye a leisure-moment's time
To hear what's comin? (ll. 19-24)³

Burns here, and elsewhere, uses the spontaneity formula in an attempt to give the illusion that the epistle is an effortless and unpremeditated outpouring of thought and feeling neatly arranged in the intricacies of the Habbie Stanza form. The spontaneity formula is in fact an illusion of art. Burns no doubt worked for hours over these seemingly spontaneous stanzas.

³All quotations are from *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. by James Kinsley, 3 vols (Oxford, 1968).

Weston, it should be noted, sees this sort of spontaneity in terms of the Scots epistolary conventions:

Since all Scots epistles before him discuss the poetic productions of the correspondents, he includes quite naturally theories of poetic composition in keeping with his view of himself: the true poet is always untaught and only composes carelessly for the pleasure and as a spontaneous emotional release of feeling, generally for women and nature, thus awakening those feelings in others.⁴

This is true on the thematic level. However, Burns's use of spontaneity is quite a bit more utilitarian than Weston indicates here. For Burns, spontaneity formulas become structurally significant as transitional devices whereby Burns moves from the epistolary particulars, relevant solely to the addressee, to poetic universals, as will be seen especially in regard to the epistles to William Simson, the first and second epistles to Lapraik, "To a Young Friend," and to David Sillar. In addition, a spontaneity formula is sometimes used to conclude the epistles as well—as in the epistles to John Rankine, Sillar, the first epistle to Lapraik, and to Smith.

In the self-referential section of the epistle to James Smith, Burns views himself from two perspectives: the poet in relation to other people and, more importantly, the poet in relation to an external power principle. (This principle assumes various forms in the different epistles, but essentially it is made manifest by "Fortune" and the "Muse.") For Burns, this principle is intimately connected with the second function of the spontaneity formula—the introduction of self-referential artistic themes. The basis of this professedly spontaneous outpouring of verse is, of course, his "Muse" in her various disguises:

The star that rules my luckless lot,
Has fated me the russet coat,
An' damn'd my fortune to the goate;
But, in requit,
Has blest me with a *random-shot*
O' countra wit. (ll. 31-6)

Though Burns makes clearer the interconnectedness of the Muse, fortune, and his own spontaneity in other epistles, he here illustrates a central epistolary theme. Burns sees himself as the passive recipient and observer of the workings of the external power principle. Verbs such as "rules," "has fated," "damn'd," and "has blest" all indicate that he is at the mercy of powers far larger than himself. Indeed, Burns vows to "wander on with

⁴Weston, p. 200.

tentless heed /...Till fate shall snap the brittle thread" (ll. 55, 57). Though these sentiments were poetic commonplaces long before his day, Burns uses them to lay the groundwork for the more general and more universal philosophical interlude on life, death and fate (ll. 61-120). By means of the epistle's general concern with fortune's (or more specifically, misfortune's) application to existence, Burns's own struggles become representative of every person's philosophical struggles with life's meaning. He transcends the potentially bleak vision of existence with the optimism of defiance:

And others, like your humble servan',
Poor wights! nae rules nor roads observin;
To right or left, eternal swervin,
 They zig-zag on;
Till curst with Age, obscure an' starvin,
 They aften groan.

Alas! what bitter toil an' straining—
But truce with peevish, poor complaining!
Is Fortune's fickle *Luna* waning?
 E'en let her gang!
Beneath what light she has remaining,
 Let's sing our Sang. (ll. 109-20)

This brings Burns back to an intense preoccupation with his own creative powers, centering on a defiant affirmation of poetry's transcendent value and on his growing self-confidence as a poet. Fortune may indeed be unfair, and life may indeed be a struggle, but Burns claims he will be content with a "rowth o' rhymes" (l. 126) and "sterling Wit" (l. 137). This poetic gift and the exploitation of it to the utmost represent his more general key to transcendence, as will be seen in regard to the other epistles.

Regrettably, the power and force of Burns's proclamation of poetic confidence loses its climactic vitality in the clumsy, overt address to the wider audience that he uses to terminate the epistle. Here is Burns's attempt to relate didactically and blatantly the particular personal application of the epistle to the universal human condition of the wider audience he envisions for himself. Yet, bombast aside, the last stanza, by means of another spontaneity formula, abruptly breaks the address to the universal audience and returns to Smith for a fond farewell:

Whilst I—but I shall haud me there—
 Wi' you I'll scarce gang *ony where*—
 Then *Jamie*, I shall say nae mair,
 But quat my sang,
 Content *with* You to mak a *pair*,
 Whare'er I gang. (*ll.* 169-74)

And quit he does. This seemingly chatty epistle has no real conclusion. It merely stops, as though it were in fact composed on the spot in a single draft. If it were composed on the spot, as the spontaneity formula would have us believe, this would account for the abrupt termination. But since in all likelihood it was not composed as a one-shot finished product, this problem of ending an epistle thus becomes a function of the poet having to strike a balance between the particular and the universal, by having in effect two vastly different audiences simultaneously.

Nowhere is this problem of the conclusion more evident than in the "Epistle to Davie." The lapse into Shenstonian sentiment at the epistle's end has been noted by numerous commentators, so I will not rehearse their arguments here. Yet this epistle also demonstrates a remarkable degree of internal coherence and universal application. As Kinsley notes in his commentary,⁵ this epistle in all likelihood was composed as a poem before Burns made an epistle of it, and in essence it still remains a poem of social commentary with an epistolary conclusion appended to it.

However, a striking feature of this epistle, in contrast to so many others, is the ease and fluidity with which it moves to its universal theme. Burns dispenses with the traditional epistolary introduction. By the end of the first stanza he gives us a traditional Scottish poetic introduction involving the gloomy winter exterior contrasted to the warm and snug interior of his home. By means of a spontaneity formula (*ll.* 4-6) he makes a passing reference to himself, and then he plunges into the heart of his matter—his social commentary on the benefits of simple poverty, which is a theme common to many of Burns's epistles as well as to much of his poetry. This epistle's thematic core comes in stanza five, concluding that neither titles, money, learning, nor any of the superficial social rewards are of transcendent value because "The *heart* ay's the part ay, / That makes us right or wrang" (*ll.* 69-70). We can witness this theme actually operating in many of his satires.

Throughout the social commentary in the "Epistle to Davie" we find a consistent focus on the role of fortune in controlling people's lives. Fortune makes Burns, as well as the "Great-folk," who and what they are; it gives them their respective gifts. Again, fortune is the active agent, the power principle, and people are the passive beneficiaries or victims. Yet

⁵Kinsley, p. 1039.

one of the key elements of the social commentary here is Burns's insistence on the vast difference in attitude toward fortune between himself and the "Great-folk." They are "careless, and fearless, / Of either Heaven or Hell" (ll. 81), whereas Burns recognizes his own helplessness in the face of the external forces. Burns resolves this theme, as he does in most of the other epistles, by passively and graciously accepting his lot and by using the gifts of fortune (and the Muse) to fullest advantage, thereby asserting a measure of creative free will. Though he focusses on the predominance of fortune in life, Burns in his epistles is not a strict determinist by any means. As we can see in the spontaneity formulas, the muse inspires him, but he will ultimately determine the direction his creation will take.

Unfortunately, when the focus of "The Epistle to Davie" turns to the addressee the insight and force drown in the saccharine sentimentality of English neoclassical poetics. Stanza eight provides the flimsiest of transitions from the probing insight of his social consciousness to the transparent superficialities of the Shenstonian hymn to love. As if sensing this, Burns excuses himself and provides a conclusion for the epistle—again by using a spontaneity formula:

O, how that *name* inspires my style!
 The words come skelpan, rank and file,
 Amaist before I ken!
 The ready measure rins as fine,
 As *Phoebus* and the famous *Nine*
 Were glowran owre my pen. (ll. 141-6)

The next epistle that appears in the Kilmarnock edition is the "Epistle to a Young Friend." Structurally, this one bears many similarities to the "Epistle to Davie." Both epistles have only brief introductions and then plunge into the central thematic issue by way of a transitional spontaneity formula:

But how the subject theme may gang,
 Let time and chance determine;
 Perhaps it may turn out a Sang;
 Perhaps, turn out a Sermon. (ll. 5-8)

Of course, the "Epistle to a Young Friend" turns out to be a sermon of a type unusual in Burns's canon. Like that to David Sillar, the "Epistle to a Young Friend" concerns the interplay of fortune and life. More so than the "Epistle to Davie," the one to Burns's young friend Andrew Aiken functions structurally and thematically as a genuine epistle, as opposed to being a poem with a salutation and conclusion added. Burns skillfully moves from the salutation to the beginning of his meditation on life by

keeping Andrew's presence before us (and before Andrew himself) through the first two stanzas, by which time the poet eases us into the subject matter of the epistle—the paternal advice to Andrew (and by extension, to all innocent, idealistic youth) on how to get along in a less than ideal world. The apparent tone of Burns's sermon in the "Epistle to a Young Friend" is unlike that in any of the other Kilmarnock epistles in that he takes a dim view of life at the capricious hands of fortune, yet he does so without the overt, optimistic corrective that characterizes the epistle to James Smith. He preaches not merely acceptance but placation of the external power principles as the means by which to overcome life's seemingly inescapable potential for unpleasantness.⁶

As advice on how to get on in the world, we can take Burns's epistle at face value, believing in the momentary sincerity of "...may ye better reckon the *rede*, / Than ever did th' *Adviser*!" (ll. 87-8). Indeed, the dark view expressed in this epistle fits well thematically with the poems immediately preceding it in the Kilmarnock edition: "Despondency, an Ode," "Man was made to Mourn," "Winter, a Dirge," "A Prayer, in the Prospect of Death," "To a Mountain Daisy," and "To Ruin." Burns uses the epistle to his young friend in a seemingly deliberate attempt to point out his own weaknesses, thereby lending force and sincerity to the last line. Yet, the epistle preaches the benefit of a divided self, of a self insulated and isolated from the necessary joys and shocks of life that form the experiences by which everyone, especially the young and innocent, must learn and grow. Since the import of this epistle is so out of character given what we know about the poet (and presumably what Burns's immediate audience knew as well), an interpretation of this epistle as being at least partially ironic is too tempting to be resisted.

The two epistles to Lapraik included in the Kilmarnock edition best illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of the epistle genre and of Burns's skill in employing it. The "Epistle to J. L*****k, An Old Scotch Bard" opens with a poetic setting reminiscent of the "Epistle to Davie." Yet, whereas the epistle to Sillar begins in a serious tone and remains so, Burns in the first stanza of the epistle to Lapraik undercuts the serious call to the Muse by having the sources of his inspiration be "briers an' woodbines...Paitricks...And morning Poosie whiddan seen" (ll. 1-3). Hardly the stuff of which epic invocations are made. Burns carries this light, comic tone throughout the epistle by means of self-deprecating humor and by the satire on schooling.

⁶Parts of his message to his young friend echo *Hamlet*. Specifically, in stanza five of the epistle Burns echoes Polonius's advice to Laertes (I,iii,58-81), and in l. 87 he echoes Ophelia's admonishment of Laertes' advice to her (I,iii,46-51). For a further discussion of the advice in the epistle see Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Stanford, 1960), pp. 102-03.

As a poetic letter to the addressee, the first epistle to Lapraik fulfills its nominal function—namely introducing Burns's personality and character (or the image of these) to a man who has never met him. For this reason, Lapraik would have no doubt taken a great interest in Burns's six-stanza homage to his (Lapraik's) talent as a song writer. Yet this homage also illustrates the chronic problem of self-referential material in the epistle-as-poem. We can admire the poetic skill employed in writing the epistle, but in the final analysis Burns's intimate communication to Lapraik forms a closed world to which we are afforded little access. However, the epistle to Lapraik, in typical Burns fashion, does move from the closed world of particulars to the more universal concerns of the relationship of art and the artist to society—a favorite theme in these Kilmarnock epistles. Burns skillfully maneuvers away from his immediate relation to Lapraik and, while still keeping himself in the foreground, moves to the discussion of himself as poet in relation to the social forces around him. The result is not only poetic theorizing, but pointed social satire as well. This satire, similar to the themes of the other epistles, centers on the role of fortune in human affairs. Burns portrays himself as "just a *Rhymer* like by chance" (l. 50), and he links his poetic abilities to the Muse by way of another, albeit oblique, spontaneity formula: "Whene'er my Muse does on me glance, / I jingle at her" (ll. 53-4). This formula leads Burns to the heart of his universal theme wherein he illustrates the relative merits of inspiration versus formal learning. This culminates in stanza twelve:

A set o' dull, conceited Hashes,
 Confuse their brains in *Colledge-classes*!
 They *gang in* Stirks, and *come out* Asses,
 Plain truth to speak;
 An' syne they think to climb Parnassus
 By dint o' Greek! (ll. 67-72)

The remainder of this epistle addresses itself primarily to Lapraik and does not carry the satiric edge of the central section. In striving for a conclusion Burns verges on lapsing into sentimentality similar to that found at the end of the "Epistle to Davie," though fortunately Burns holds his climactic sentiment in check by again relying on a spontaneity formula in the last stanza: "But to conclude my lang epistle, / As my auld pen's worn to the gristle..." (ll. 127-8). This epistle is one of the more successful in accomplishing its nominal task—namely to introduce Burns to a man whose poetic talent he admires but whom he does not know. Yet, the elevation of particulars to universals in the epistle-as-poem is less effective here than in other epistles.

The second epistle to Lapraik, however, is a masterpiece of the epistle genre. Here Burns adroitly moves from the particular to the universal and back again with supreme craftsmanship and rhetorical power of a kind only partially realized in the other epistles. The particular message of the

personal communication is itself a universal vision of the glorification of simple, poetic poverty. This epistle no doubt was inspired as a response to and commentary on Lapraik's financial misfortunes in the years before Burns made his acquaintance as well as on Burns's own precarious financial state. Burns elevates the topic of poverty to a matter of fate and utilizes this to make a scathing statement on the nature of the materialist versus that of the artist. Burns's ringing conclusion boasts of the poet's transcendent nature.

Initially, the epistle opens with the traditional epistolary acknowledgement of the addressee's previous letter. It then moves to a self-referential comic discussion of the Muse-as-wench, echoing Fergusson's similar treatment of the Muse in his "King's Birth-Day in Edinburgh." However, unlike Burns's treatment of the Muse in his other epistles, here he boastfully attempts to control her. The feeling produced by this epistle is that, in relation to his poetic powers, he controls this "ramfeezi'd hizzie" as much as she controls him. The ultimate effect of the extended introduction is, of course, a highly comic boast about Burns's own creative powers. This characterization of the Muse-as-wench culminates in Burns's longest and most complex spontaneity formula:

Sae I gat paper in a blink,
 An' down gaed *stumpie* in the ink:
 Quoth I, 'Before I sleep a wink,
 'I vow I'll close it;
 'An' if ye [the Muse] winna mak it clink,
 'By Jove I'll prose it!'

Sae I've begun to scrawl, but whether
 In rhyme, or prose, or baith thegither,
 Or some hotch-potch that's rightly neither,
 Let time mak proof;
 But I shall scribble down some blether
 Just clean aff-loof. (ll. 31-42)

These lines create the impression of present time by means of the shifting tenses of the verbs from past to future in each of the stanzas. Burns is seemingly poised between the past moment of inspiration and the future act of actually writing what turns out to be the well-integrated content of the epistle.

Burns's boastful, defiant address to the Muse in the introduction is later echoed in his view of fortune; he begins the philosophizing on fortune and Lapraik's poverty in equally defiant terms:

My worthy friend, ne'er grudge an' carp,
 Tho' Fortune use you hard an' sharp;
 Come, kittle up your *moorlan harp*
 Wi' gleesome touch!
 Ne'er mind how Fortune *waft* an' *warp*;
 She's but a b-tch. (ll. 43-8)

And just as Burns triumphs over the lethargic Muse, he similarly triumphs over fortune's eternal torment: "I, Rob, am here" (l. 60). The only thing he desires from this external power is that it "'Gie me o' wit an' sense a lift...'" (l. 74). Burns skillfully interweaves the themes of fortune and poetic ability with the class consciousness of rich versus poor. And unlike most of the other epistles, the second epistle to Lapraik does not falter or lose its focus at the end. Burns here needs no spontaneity formula by which to conclude because he effectively unites the temporal and universal thematic strands into a rhetorically powerful and universally applicable coda in the last stanzas:

O *Mandate*, glorious and divine!
 The followers o' the ragged Nine,
 Poor, thoughtless devils! yet may shine
 In glorious light,
 While sordid sons o' Mammon's line
 Are dark as night!

Tho' here they scrape, an' squeeze, an' growl,
 Their worthless nievfu' of a soul,
 May in some *future carcase* howl,
 The forest's fright;
 Or in some day-detesting *owl*
 May shun the light.

Then may L*****k and B***** arise,
 To reach their native, kindred skies,
 And *sing* their pleasures, hopes an' joys,
 In some mild sphere,
 Still closer knit in friendship's ties
 Each passing year! (ll. 91-108)

Thus, he resolves the issue of fortune's negative social effects on the artist by means of the artist's own transcendent power, though he couches this power in the passivity of reincarnation.

"To W. S*****n, Ochiltree" lacks the unity and cohesiveness of the second epistle to Lapraik. The epistle to Simson begins with two traditionally epistolary stanzas followed by three self-referential stanzas

apparently following up on the theme of Simson's previous letter to Burns. Then quite abruptly in stanza six Burns begins his panegyric to Scotland, which occupies eleven stanzas. This praise of Scotland's glorious past offers a development on the theme of the poet's transcendent nature as it culminated in the second epistle to Lapraik. The poet not only transcends, but like a god he can also bestow transcendence.

The epistle to Simson serves not only as a boast of Scotland's one-time (and future) glory; it simultaneously praises the native, vernacular poetic traditions that in large part have helped create for Burns this glorious past and will poetically elevate Scotland's rivers to the universal stature of the Tiber, Thames, and the Seine. Burns is indeed speaking from his own experience of reading Blind Hary's *Wallace* when he (Burns) writes:

At Wallace' name, what Scottish blood,
But boils up in a spring-tide flood!
Oft have our fearless fathers strode
By Wallace' side,
Still pressing onward, red-wat-shod,
Or glorious dy'd! (ll. 61-6)

Through nature—particularly Scottish nature—the poet will find his Muse, whereby he will fulfill the great role of singing the praises of Scotland and transcend the mean, base existence of the worldly folk:

The warly race may drudge an' drive,
Hog-shouter, jundie, stretch an' strive
Let me fair Nature's face describe,
And I, wi' pleasure,
Shall let the busy, grumbling hive
Bum owre their treasure. (ll. 91-6)

Thomas Crawford sees this stanza as being the real conclusion of the epistle.⁷ This is true only if we wish to view the panegyric as stating the central thematic purpose of the epistle and to view the postscript as merely an addition, an afterthought. Indeed, Burns would have us believe that this is the case. He employs yet another spontaneity formula to create the impression that his charming little lunar allegory was not the idea closest to his heart at the time of composing the epistle; and, as Crawford

⁷Crawford, p. 98.

affirms,⁸ the introduction to the postscript serves to heighten the epistle's informality:

My memory's no worth a preen;
I had amaist forgotten clean,
Ye bad me write you what they mean
By this *new-light*.... (ll. 109-12)

Again Burns utilizes the spontaneity formula as a transitional device to get to his central concern. In this epistle, however, there are two messages, two themes, that Burns wants to convey. One is the universal—the nature of the poet's role in creating a national myth. The other is more particular—the Auld Licht / New Licht argument—though through the use of allegory even this narrow historic subject becomes comically emblematic for all the dogmatic conflicts between old truths and the new ones that challenge them.

Though these two thematic purposes appear divergent given the epistle's structure, they are not unrelated to Burns's larger poetic philosophy as expressed in the epistles. There is in fact thematic unity to the epistle to Simson. Both the hymn to Scotland and the allegory of the moon conclude with Burns proclaiming the poet's ability and need to transcend the myopic values and parochial concerns of the un-poetic people.

The epistle to Rankine is Burns's earliest epistle, though the last to appear in the Kilmarnock edition. In many ways it is quite unremarkable when placed in comparison with the other, more philosophical epistles.⁹ However, beyond the biographical element there are several characteristics that are worthy of note. There exists the chronic problem of transition from the particular epistolary intimacy to the more universal allegory of the partridge. Here Burns has no transition. The epistle moves abruptly into its comic core. Yet this little story does echo (and in reality prefigures) the defiant attitudes found in many of the other epistles. Burns, through particularly bawdy humor, undercuts the seriousness with which the Kirk views fornication and its punishment. And in keeping with many of the other epistles, Burns relies on a spontaneity formula to conclude his epistle to Rankine: "It pits me ay as mad's a hare; / So I can rhyme nor

⁸Crawford, p. 98.

⁹Franklyn Bliss Snyder in his *The Life of Robert Burns* (New York, 1932), p. 118, responding to the apparent biographical content, says of the "Epistle to John Rankine":

Burns rarely wrote with more *verve* than when composing the thirteen stanzas of this clever but blackguardly epistle. Never again was he to be so successful in this vein.

write nae mair" (ll. 73-4). The speaker gets in trouble, but he has the last laugh at the restricting social value system whose rules and parochialism he adroitly satirizes.

This theme of transcendence characterizes, to a greater or lesser degree, all of the Kilmarnock epistles. Burns capitalizes on the fact that most people, regardless of rank or circumstance, believe at one time or another in some sort of external force that controls life—the Muse, fortune, God, or whatever—and to which all people are answerable. Indeed, most people at one time or another feel, as Burns does, that they have been blessed with gifts or cursed by forces beyond human control, that there is no choice but to be thankful for the good and strive as hard as possible to overcome the bad.

Additionally, Burns's epistles grapple with the problems and philosophies of life within the social organizations. He raises the fundamental and eternal considerations of the relationships between art, the artist, and society. In Weston's words,

He keeps the formula of an elite group in conflict with the majority by dramatizing his idea that poets, lovers, and sentimentalists are at basic odds with the materialists of this world.¹⁰

In this sense, the Kilmarnock epistles serve as a poetic manifesto, a defense of poetry in the classic sense, whereby Burns provides his audience the context and criteria by which to view the other works in his first volume and by which the wider audience can also view itself.

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¹⁰Weston, p. 204.